

**The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain**  
**Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church**  
**Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Year C): October 9, 2022**

*Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7*

*Psalm 66:1-11*

*2 Tim. 2:8-15*

*Luke 17:11-19*

Let me begin this sermon by first telling you about another one, titled “Where Are the Nine?” by Martin Bell. It can be found in his classic collection of sermons, stories, poems, and songs titled *The Way of the Wolf: The Gospel in New Images*. According to his author’s bio, Bell was “an Episcopalian minister, a singer, composer, storyteller, former disc jockey, and most recently a private detective.” Just your typical priest, then. He sadly died in 2009 from pneumonia that developed after surgery at the age of 71. In this sermon, published way back in 1970, Bell sets out to answer the question we hear Jesus ask in today’s gospel lesson. After the ten lepers are healed, only one comes back to thank God, and he was not a Jew but a Samaritan. So Jesus asks: “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” Bell’s sermon takes this question not rhetorically but literally, at face-value, and answers it in a most ingenious manner, by inventing back-stories and character-sketches for each of the other nine healed lepers, explaining precisely *why* they did not return to thank God as the tenth did. Some of them are exonerated by Bell’s imagination, and some are criticized—and yet still with compassion.

One, for example, was a woman who had been separated from her family for eleven years because of her leprosy, and so in her great joy she hurried straight home. One simply forgot to return to say thanks. “That’s all,” Bell tells us. “He was so happy that he forgot.” And so on. Bell sums up each of these explanatory vignettes as follows: “...what of the nine? They are on the way home, hiding in fear, refusing to believe, offended at what they call cheap grace, so happy they forgot, lost without their leprosy, unable to say thank you ever again, publishing the news of the coming of the Kingdom—God, who knows where they are!”

Bell’s sermon is both clever and compassionate, and I commend it to you, but in some ways it is what the British call, “too clever by half.” If you Google this phrase you will find various explanations, such as being “annoyingly proud of one’s intelligence or skill,” or “too contrived or arrogant in one’s cleverness or intelligence, to the point of being irritating to others.” Bell does seem rather impressed with himself here.

But he also seems rather frustrated with Jesus and unhappy with the obvious intention of Luke's story. For example, Bell explicitly says in the sermon that "God does not heal people and then stand around just waiting for us to say thank you and then get angry and have his feeling hurt if we don't". Well, of course God doesn't. But we should still say "thank you"! And it seems that the point of this story, conveyed in Jesus' response to the lack of gratitude from the nine lepers and his praise of the Samaritan who came back, is to remind us that gratitude to God is always appropriate, especially in extraordinary situations. True, God does not *need* our thanks and praise, but *we* still need to thank and praise God. And we need to do this not just because—as the older Rite I Prayer Book language says—"it is meet and right so to do," but because in giving thanks and praise to God we acknowledge the gracious divine reality on which our lives depend. We acknowledge the profound truth about ourselves, namely that we really do need God to give us this day our daily bread. And precisely because it's so easy for us to forget this, to slip into complacency, and delusions of self-sufficiency, that the intentional discipline of *remembering* to give thanks is a vital spiritual practice.

One way we give thanks and praise to God is by being as generous as we can with what God has given us. Generosity to others is an important response to God's generosity for us for at least four reasons. First, it acknowledges that everything we have we have from God to begin with, so it's all God's anyway. Second, it allows us to actually imitate God by giving to others just as God has given us. Third, it reminds us to keep trusting in God's continuous provision and to not cling to what we already have as if that's all there is. But fourth and finally because there is a remarkable reciprocity to generous giving that benefits everyone, including those who give. I thus find God's instructions to the exiles of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah to be of great interest. God tells them, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." In other words, God is saying to them: the more you invest in your community, the better off *you* will be.

As Mother Leyla announced last week, we are now beginning our stewardship season. But it seems to me that such a season isn't just about determining your annual pledge to the parish, as important as that is to the welfare of the aptly named *Thankful* Memorial Episcopal Church, but about reflecting with gratitude on all of God's many gifts to us, financial and otherwise, and asking ourselves how we can become more generous with what we have, not just in terms of money but with our time and energy as well. Stewardship season is about seeking the welfare of the community in which we live—parish, neighborhood, city, state, country, and world—for in its welfare we will find our welfare. So let us, like the healed Samaritan, give thanks.